

# Nailing Jell-O to a Tree: Centering the Distracted Student

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GP3 2018 Oberlin

Attention: 1) the regarding of someone or something as interesting or important, 2) the behavioral or cognitive process of selectively concentrating on something while ignoring other perceivable information.

Distraction is caused by the greater intensity, novelty, or attractiveness of something else at a particular moment in time. Distraction can be internal or external.

Thoughts about iGen students (b. 1995 and later) and divided attention:

- Popular culture encourages and rewards divided attention.
- Instructors now utilize teaching methods which encourage divided attention.
- We will not change popular culture or technology.
- The human mind does not easily focus on one task for an extended period of time.
- We can learn to observe how our attention works, and develop skills and strategies for refocusing attention.
- Technology is not the culprit.
- What has changed for iGen students: faster visual cues, smaller bits of information, breadth over depth, quantity over quality, product over process.

## Attentional training

Spotlight model: attention has a focus, margin, and fringe

Zoom-lens model: attention can also be adjusted in size

Attentional filter: we can control what to focus on, and what to ignore

Our focus can be broad or narrow, internal or external.

	External	Internal
Broad	<b>Assessing:</b> Focus on the general external environment (audience, acoustics, conductor)	<b>Analyzing:</b> Focus on one's thoughts and emotions during a performance (anxiety management)
Narrow	<b>Acting:</b> Focus on the outward execution of a physical skill (during a virtuosic coda)	<b>Preparing:</b> Focus on readying oneself to execute a given skill (preparing for a large leap)

(adapted from *SportPsych Works* 2014)

## Deliberately shifting focus during a performance

To manage anxiety: narrow external focus

To avoid an impending memory slip: broad internal or broad external focus

To focus after a distraction: narrow internal

### Focus cues for attentional training

- It is impossible to maintain a single point of focus for an extended period of time  
...focus cues can help plan for more intense moments of focus
- When unguided, the human mind will most frequently drift towards the negative  
...focus cues can help emphasize desired outcomes
- Types of focus planning:
  - o Focus graph for a piece of music (peaks and valleys of focus intensity)
  - o Creative words, phrases, images for different points in the music
  - o Abstract visual map of the piece
  - o Performance day focus cues

Mindfulness: The deliberate focus of awareness, without evaluation, on thoughts and events of the present moment.

### Psychological benefits of mindfulness:

Attentional control	Objective self-assessment
Ability to refocus quickly after a distraction	Greater ability to accept criticism
Reduced mental chatter	Increased empathy and compassion
Improved concentration	Feelings of social connectedness
Increase in relaxing alpha brainwaves	Improved sense of wellbeing
Decreased stress and anxiety	

### **Some strategies for centering the distracted student:**

1. Create psychological “space” within the learning environment
  - Begin each lesson or practice with one minute of mindful breathing
  - Pause mid-lesson to experience silence, regroup, or focus awareness
  - For teachers: pause mid-lesson to stop *teaching* and practice listening, asking, or reflecting
  - Practice finding comfort in silence
2. Make body awareness a regular practice
  - Begin each lesson or practice session with quiet awareness of the physical self
  - Pause mid-lesson or mid-practice to check in with the body, its alignment and balance, releasing unnecessary tension
  - Address physical needs (hunger, thirst, bathroom) before practicing or performing
  - For teachers: pause mid-lesson to become aware of the physical self, including tension or misalignment
3. Help students develop awareness of thought
  - Practice observing thoughts with detached curiosity
  - Recognize that thoughts are not facts
  - Replace maladaptive thoughts with positive, healthy thoughts
  - Recognize the thoughts behind each emotion
  - Practice impulse control with smartphones and social media
  - Redirect thoughts to practice redirecting attention

#### 4. Cultivate a safe space for students

- Create an environment where experimentation is encouraged
- Allow students to take risks
- Allow students to think (or play) outside the box
- Acknowledge mistakes without excessive judgment
- Develop an atmosphere of joy and creativity

#### 5. Help students develop mindful practice habits

- Practice slowly (when practical) with awareness of each moment
- Practice “deep listening”
- Articulate goals for each repetition in practice
- Approach each repetition with thoughtful awareness
- Practice mindful self-assessment of each repetition

#### 6. Offer students specific assignments and guidelines for breathwork and other contemplative practices

Example: **Ten-Second Centering** (E. Maisel 2005)

Inhale for 5 counts. Exhale for 5 counts.

Use each breath cycle as a “container” to hold a thought or affirmation.

(Inhale) I am... (Exhale) ...completely stopping.

#### Mindfulness and the music teacher

- Manage burnout, mental fatigue, physical tension or pain
- Develop healthy attentional training skills
- Cultivate quiet awareness during conflicts with students or colleagues
- Remain present with students who are performing, misbehaving, or sharing personal struggles
- Separate the sense of self or self-worth from quality of work (teaching, performing, research, service, administration)
- Handle criticism or professional rejection
- Let go: choosing battles with detached compassion

#### Vanessa’s tips for students

- Make your body comfortable before you begin
- Turn off all electronic devices and mute all notifications
- Close the door and put up a “do not disturb” sign
- De-clutter your surroundings
- Set a timer
- Make mindfulness and attentional training part of your daily practice routine

“...the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character, and will. [...] An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence.*” ~ William James (*Principles of Psychology*, 1890)

## A Few Online Resources

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

[The Tree of Contemplative Practices](#) (may save as .jpg)  
[Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education](#)

College Music Society: musician health and wellness webinar series (available to non-members)

[Mindfulness Practice for Students and Faculty](#) by Vanessa Cornett  
[The Role of the Teacher in Keeping our Students Healthy](#) by Gail Berenson  
[A Musician's Guide to the Brain](#) by Lois Svard  
[The Emotional Practice Environment: How Thoughts and Moods Can Influence Muscle States and Injury Risk](#) by Jennie Morton  
[Athletes and the Arts: What Musicians Can Learn From Athletes](#) by Randall Dick and John Snyder

Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy: teacher education webinar series (available to *Clavier Companion* sonata and concerto subscribers)

[The Words We Speak: The Power of Language in Nurturing Confident Musicians](#) by Vanessa Cornett

### [MTNA Wellness Resources](#)

[Annotated Bibliography on Musician Wellness](#) (PDF)  
[Wellness Resources for the Musician](#) by Linda Cockey (PDF)  
Webinar: [Injury Prevention: What Musicians Can Do](#) by Christine Guptill

National Conference on Keyboard Pedagogy Committee on Wellness for the Pianist

[Wellness Curriculum Outline](#)

### [Athletes and the Arts](#)

[Performance Anxiety Fact Sheet](#) (PDF)  
[A Mindful Approach to Warm-up for Musicians](#) (PDF)

### [Ohio Center for Sport Psychology](#)

Fact Sheet: [Concentration and Attention in Sport](#) (PDF)

Blogs:

[The Bulletproof Musician](#)  
[The Musician's Way](#)

“The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness.”  
~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*

“To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”  
~ Mary Oliver